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Principal Perceptions of Strategies to Increase Effectiveness of Educational Non-Governmental Organizations in Southern Belize

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Abstract

Collaborations among schools and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are common in developing countries. These partnerships have the potential to provide effective support for educational initiatives. This study used survey methodology to determine characteristics of NGOs that increased effectiveness as determined by experienced principals (n=15) within a region of Belize. The survey used open-ended questions, and these responses were disaggregated in order to determine themes. These principals wrote that effective NGOs built strong relationships with the schools, aligned efforts with the school's mission, and assisted with providing resources.

Keywords: Belize, education, NGO, partnerships, principals

1. Introduction

The United National Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) calls education “a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights” (UNESCO, 2012). The benefits of education transcend the personal development of the child and include increased economic prosperity and standard of living among the society as a whole. Education is the great equalizer. But isolation and resource scarcity have an adverse impact on educational attainment, especially within developing countries. A common problem with these schools is the lack of resources and educator development opportunities (Chimombo, 2005). Outside organizations may be able to assist in the improvement of the global pursuit for educational attainment by focused assistance in these areas. These groups become international partners, often called non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which must be strategic in their support for effective assistance.

There are unique obstacles to educational development in other countries and cultures, and from an ethical lens, certain behaviors are important for outsiders to consider (Hickey, Achtem, & Nuner, 2012; Gill & Nuner, 2012). Just as each person is unique, each educational system provides inimitable challenges to be addressed. An outsider must understand the culture of the region and schools in order to have an impact upon the administrators, and more importantly, build local autonomy so that any educational development is sustainable (Hickey et al., 2012).

International partnerships can provide assistance in sustainable strategies related to school improvement. Understanding the benefits and areas of needed improvement among these partnerships is the purpose of this article. Data is presented from a survey of a group of experienced principals in a district of Belize who shared perceptions related to the issues of working with NGOs. The principals surveyed have the challenges of any educational leader along with other obstacles related to poverty, language, and general resources, including time. The results of this survey suggest that these Central American educational leaders desire partnerships that are focused on a shared vision for improvement and long-term commitment.

2. Context of the Region

Belize is considered a developing country (The World Bank, 2014), which means from an educational perspective that obtaining resources can be challenging. This lack of resources often limits opportunities for both students and educators. Data states this region has an 80% low socioeconomic level (Rural Poverty Portal, n.d.). Author experience suggests this percentage is a little misleading. The region is rural, and many families exist through subsistence farming (Levasseur & Olivier, 2000).

Corn is grown in the fields, fish caught in the rivers, and livestock (usually pigs and chickens) graze beside the huts prior to slaughtering. Children are well fed and dressed in clean clothes washed in nearby rivers. Nevertheless, there is little discretionary income that can be spent on educational initiatives.

These rural villages exist within the rain forest and can be accessed by bus on most days. This allows teachers to live closer to a bigger town and travel to the school. Many of these teachers do not have a strong formal educational background, with 56.5% considered untrained (Ministry of Education, Youth & Sports, 2013). The local education department is demanding increased training, but this process is taking time and is hindered by a lack of opportunities.

There are significant obstacles embedded in the workplace of teachers and principals that make the lack of educational training an even bigger factor. A teacher often has multiple grades of students in their classroom, and 30 or 40 of these students in a class is not uncommon. A teacher has a number of academic levels and pupil needs to be addressed through instructional strategies. Principals often have teaching responsibilities along with administrative duties such as maintaining a budget, keeping attendance, community relations, and others (Achtem, 2010). In addition, these leaders are expected to provide developmental supervision of teachers while effectively being a teaching principal.

One of the major concerns of a principal is fund-raising. This region has limited resources, so assistance in this area is always appreciated. Government funding covers teacher salaries and little else, thus making resource-dependent changes difficult. Historically, NGOs provide assistance with staff development and school supplies. This is an expected, and usually appreciated relationship that occurs in the schools.

3. Non-Governmental Organizations

NGOs are a common way for groups to have an impact on global education. NGOs have been defined as follows:

A NGO is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of service and humanitarian functions, bring citizen concerns to Governments, advocate and monitor policies and encourage political participation through provision of information. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, environment or health. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. Their relationship with offices and agencies of the United Nations system differs depending on their goals, their venue and the mandate of a particular institution. (ngo.org, n.d.)

This definition provides significant leeway for interpretation, but the basic premise is that NGOs are not associated with a government but led by a group of invested individuals with a common purpose. Education related NGOs may take radically different approaches to a problem, but they are focused on developing professional educator capacity as a foundation for the improvement of both the individual and region.

This does not mean that education NGOs are always seen as beneficent. A study out of Pakistan concluded that volunteer organizations traditionally addressed the needs of the less fortunate, but NGOs began to create environments for increased private business influence, often to the detriment of the poor (Bano, 2008). International partners should be cognizant of the impact being made in the communities being served. Providing resources and guidance regarding educational initiatives may be helpful, but building leadership capacity so that the programs continue after the partnership dissolves may be more important. Hickey, et al. (2012) asserted the importance of building long-term relationships that allow the partners to understand the context of the region, measure the impact of the assistance, and move toward promoting local autonomy. Effective plans require commitment.

The need for a committed partnership has been addressed in the work of Gill and Nuner (2012) who analyzed the effectiveness of the NGO Teachers for a Better Belize (2010) and its impact on implementing a balanced literacy curriculum. Their conclusions suggest that a long-term commitment that includes regular evaluation and follow-up is beneficial to effective initiatives. These researchers also recognized the potential impact of administrator development to provide support for teachers.

4. Method

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of NGOs in a region of Belize of which the researcher had been assisting with principal training on 12 occasions over four years. The involvement of the researcher in determining areas of need make this an action research. Action researchers are not outside the study but are a part of the overall systems and process being analyzed. Berg (2001) stated:

The researcher collaborates with local practitioners as well as stakeholders in the group or community. Other participants contribute their physical and/or intellectual resources to the research process. The researcher is a partner with the study population; thus, this type of research is considerably more value-laden than other more traditional research roles and endeavors. (p. 185)

The value of this data included its use in evaluating the NGO of which the researcher was involved, as well as provide general guidelines for others that want to be of service to this region.

This was a qualitative study that used open-ended survey questions to determine the impact of NGOs on schools in a district in Belize. This was a purposive and convenient sampling (Neuman, 2000). Purposive in that it was only given to principals (n=15) with over five years experience as an administrator, and convenient in that it was a part of a workshop that was addressing issues within the schools of the region. There were three women principals and 12 men, and they were the head of schools with enrollments that ranged from 35 students to 765. Ten of these schools were Roman Catholic, two were Methodist, and three government. Each of the schools had worked with a number of NGOs, both religious and secular.

The researcher of this study had a long history of assisting with professional development of principals in this region. This relationship building was important in the earning of trust, but it did create a limitation to the study. The long-term relationship may have impacted some of the responses so that they would not seem critical. Although there is no evidence that this happened, and participants completed the survey anonymously, awareness of this factor must be clear. This issue is one of all action researchers who work within the system and use data to inform practice.

The survey was five open-ended questions related to NGOs and international partnerships. Open-ended questions were determined to be the most valuable means to get a better understanding of the issues with NGOs because of the ability of the respondent to have the freedom to answer without leading (Neuman, 2000). The determination of consistent themes within the open-ended questions resulted in several issues being mentioned within one response, thus resulting in percentages after each question often being over 100%. Throughout this paper the definition of international partner and NGO are the same, as this was the understanding of the respondents. The questions were as follows:

1. What works well in non-governmental organization initiatives?
2. What are characteristics of effective international groups working in the schools?
3. Are there times when non-governmental organizations are harmful to the goals of your school? Why are some groups ineffective?
4. What recommendations do you have for non-governmental organizations that would help them become more effective?
5. What would you like to see that is currently not taking place?

The responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to major themes. Responses often had multiple themes, and in these circumstances they were included in the statistics for each one.

5. Results

5.1 What works well in non-governmental organization initiatives? There were three major themes to this question that included the advancement of the school's mission, building relationships, and providing resources. The advancement of the school's mission was mentioned in 67% of responses (n=10). The clearest comment was a principal who stated "when it empowers the school's vision and mission", but others alluded to this by writing "having knowledge of school needs" or "accountability in achievement [of schools] goals/objectives". Other related comments discussed the need to align with the Ministry of Education, which suggested the need to focus on the mission of education in the region.

An international partner must build effective relationships, and statements that alluded to this were written 67% of the time.

One statement in particular covered the need to connect with multiple groups in the region: “In effective non-governmental organization initiatives that works with Congress of Maya teachers with UniceF-IBE programs/Intercultural Bilingual Education- TFABB training with principal/teachers-Plenty Belize with United Nations/European [sic]”. This statement mentions many of the major international partners that work in the region, and the need to have complementary strategies in order to keep the mission aligned with ongoing work.

The benefits of resources were also mentioned through statements like “donation/contribution in the area of material stuff for schools”. The limited resources in developing countries result in appreciation for any contributions, so this being mentioned in 40% of responses is not surprising. That it was mentioned so much less than relationships and mission suggests the experience of principals who are likely to have witnessed well-meaning initiatives fail when resources were the main factor.

5.2 What are characteristics of effective international groups working in the schools? There were two major themes to this question that emerged from this question. The most commonly listed characteristics of effective international groups were the building of relationships. Eleven principals (73%) named this in their comments, making statements like the need for “long term commitment to ensure continuity and accountability of schools to partners and local stakeholders”, or “some are friendly ... take the initiative to visit schools and discuss with the principal about the progress of projects ... their willingness and honest promise”. Some of the comments alluded to the need for relationships through the comments about long-term commitments, such as the one that stated, “provide resources and follow up, monitor the implementation of project”. The principals were clear that a long-term relationship with their schools was a characteristic of effectiveness.

The other major theme was connected to resources. As stated previously this is not surprising in a country where educational materials are needed. Principals mentioned this 53% of the time (n=8). Comments included the unambiguous “provide resources” to the more subtle “establishment of libraries, internet”. The need for resources was summed up with “schools receive more than the government/mission can offer in terms of buildings, books, etc.”.

5.3 Are there times when non-governmental organizations are harmful to the goals of your school? Why are some groups ineffective? The majority of principals (60%) answered that NGOs were not harmful to their school, although many of these listed why some groups are ineffective. The principals that stated that there was harm done (40%; n=6) had two primary characteristics for this taking place. First, some NGOs pushed their own agenda without regard to the needs of the school. This was evident in comments like “harmful when the group’s mission is not in line with the mission of the school”. Relating to this different purpose, one principal wrote “some groups are ineffective because they use the name of Belize as partners in education but actually being a tourist”. The second characteristic mentioned by those who indicated harm is through poor communication. “Late notice of certain initiative” and “interrupt the learning of schools during the year, no plans, no or less communication” were some of the comments related to this characteristic.

Although the majority of principals have not experienced harmful effects of NGOs, many of the respondents added comments regarding ineffectiveness. Two principals said the fault of an ineffective partnership resided with the school, writing “some groups may be ineffective because of indifferences at the school” and “sometimes our lack of feedback to the organization discourages them”. Others noted the lack of long-term commitment from the international partners: “Some are only a ‘snapshot’, others are only short-term” and “promise a whole lot to a number of schools – no monitoring and no follow-up”. Several principals could not think of any problems with NGOs, adding statements like “no bad experience so far”, “all help us achieve our goals”, and “we are glad to have them assist us”.

5.4 What recommendations do you have for non-governmental organizations that would help them become more effective? Three overriding themes emerged from this survey question. Principals believed NGOs could become more effective through a greater understanding of the culture, development of long-term initiatives, and obtaining more input from stakeholders. The first suggestion, to become accustomed to the culture, had some interesting suggestions. One respondent wrote, “Become more acquainted with practices and culture of our country. Belizeans tend to be cold and cautious. Partners have a more sociable spirit and come with enthusiasm which is shyly shared by locals.” Understanding the culture also included recognizing the specific needs of the school. Principals wrote of the need to “become familiar with school goals”, “get informed about the school ahead of time”, and “laise [sic] with school leaders”. Principals mentioned some aspect of understanding the culture of the community and school as important 67% of the time.

Several of the principals (33%) wrote that a long-term partnership was important and recommended for effectiveness. One principal asserted “do survey of needs (school/community), provide a variety of support/resources, help across the board, assistance should be long-term and sustainable, monitor and provide feedback, enhance growth”. The above statement included many characteristics, but they all require a long-term commitment to be viable. Other principals recommended “extending the time of their work at a particular school” and “follow up on the development of projects”.

Increasing stakeholder input was written about by 33% of principals. Analysis of themes suggested this was closely related to increasing cultural understanding, but this appeared to be a specific point some respondents wanted to make. One comment stated “Involve full participation of population involved so that they are aware of the goals/objectives or limitation of projects undertaken”. A comment like this suggests an international initiative needs to include the feedback of the community as well as educators within the schools. Another response mentioned community directly: “My recommendations need to be participation of all stakeholders on projects. Need to assess before and after. There is a need for the organization to plan in line with the goals and vision of certain school or community”.

5.5 What would you like to see that is currently not taking place? Three themes emerged from this question, along with one comment that deserves further mention. The themes included the need for teacher training, increased planning, and resource acquisition. Although teacher training could be considered part of planning, it was a topic that was mentioned 33% of the time.

The principals specifically addressed the need for increased teacher development through responses such as “provide more assistance in funding the training of teachers across all schools and not just in one area” and “facilitate workshop for teachers”. Math was specifically mentioned twice with a representative sample being “more expert in area [sic] of weakness in Belize ... especially in math and experimental base lesson”. The researcher is not completely sure what was meant by “experimental base lesson” but believe it is related to hands-on student engagement.

Planning that included issues outside of teacher development was also a theme 33% of the time. The issue of planning related to sustainability of the project was mentioned, such as the statement that “as much effort should be made by NGO, to help build capacity and to create partnership such that when the NGO leaves, its work can continue”. This move toward sustainability takes a vision that requires planning and capacity building, as alluded to in the following comments: “Being part of project implementation. Input a lot more if they are using schools to attract their funding agent” or the mention for the need to do “public consultation, do interviews and survey, have your targets for development have greater impact”. The principals recognized the need to get a shared vision of the project in order to increase effectiveness and sustainability.

The third theme mentioned related to resources. Although the region where the principals worked was economically distressed, only 20% listed this as something they would like to see that is currently not taking place. Comments included “NGOs assist schools financially so that teachers and principals works [sic] more for the betterment of children ... help in building and assisting in feeding programs ... offer more scholarships to needy children entering high school”. Other principals wanted NGOs to “assist school with equipments [sic] that could enhance academics, sports, environmental awareness, arts.”

Another idea came from the desire to see strategies that are not currently taking place. One respondent stated, “We have many volunteers coming and sharing with us. We see how they do it (show examples) with adults (teachers). I would like to go and see how they do things with children and people that know them in the states (Exchange).” This exchange program has been mentioned many times in conversations, suggesting that many of the principals would find it valuable.

6. Discussion

Friedman (2005) has stated that the world is flat, alluding to the relatively equal opportunities for all people on a technological connected planet. This has merit to an extent, but some populations are unable to provide the foundational educational tools to allow for a flat world, either due to cultural beliefs or resource limitations. Assisting with the creation of this educational capacity is something of which international partners may assist, and the development of education on the global stage has the potential for far-reaching impacts in schools. This paper examined the perceptions of Belize principals regarding what is effective (and ineffective) in NGOs, as well as recommendations related to assistance that is needed from these partners. Taken as a whole, the principals’ responses led to three overriding areas of importance.

First, relationships are important. Outsiders working in global education will encounter a different culture with unique nuances. This is addressed by Crossley (2001) who stated that “too often internationally inspired educational innovations fail because they are not well fitted to the local context in which they are to operate, and to real needs, values, and priorities” (p. 226-227). Understanding these subtle cultural differences take time, and any outsider who wants to positively impact a school should make the effort to understand local behaviors. A stranger who violates local customs is unlikely to be able to make a difference.

Being a stranger within an international partnership is not a good thing, and friendships are developed over time. One of the respondents said that Belizeans were “cold and cautious”. This is to be expected since outsiders are invading someone else’s culture. International partners must make a long-term commitment in order to develop the trust needed to have influence. One-time efforts do not provide much assistance because they lack the follow-through and understanding that allows outsiders to make a difference.

This leads to the second area of importance in effective international partnerships, alignment and continuity of effort within the schools. Educational leaders in this survey wanted the NGOs and international partners to spend time in local communities, speak with town leaders, and check on the progress of initiatives. This can only be done if there is the commitment that leads to a long-term relationship. Principals understood the need for a long-term commitment on the part of NGOs. Without it, the strategic focus in the schools changed regularly and hindered progress. The respondents mentioned both the need for assistance to be aligned with school missions and provide accountability. The principals are not looking for a quick influx of resources that may or may not be helpful but a strategy that incorporates stakeholders and continues into the future. NGOs must commit in order to make a difference.

The final area to be mentioned is the need for resources. Principals did not list this as a primary focus, but schools in developing countries benefit from increased supplies. Providing these without training and follow-up is often fruitless, but as a component of an overall systemic plan it is vital. Teachers who are great at providing instruction in reading are handicapped by a lack of books. Computer training is great, but without computers it is meaningless. Resources and increased capacity through education are interdependent.

This interdependency is true of all initiatives related to international partnerships. As chaos theory states, we are all interconnected (Waldrop, 1992), which suggest seemingly minor behaviors can have potentially major impacts (Johnson, 2007). An outsider who builds strong relationships will impact schools through consistent behaviors and educational initiatives. These new initiatives provide the capacity to effectively utilize any new resources.

None of the factors are separate, but they provide the starting point for important gains in global education. Addressing education through strong relationships, consistent efforts, and increased resources is sure to improve schools in whatever part of the world experiences it. More importantly, the impact may reach further than ever considered.

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